

## Barla – The Cradle of the Nurcu Movement

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Barla is a little village in the province of Isparta, Turkey, on the shores of Lake Eğirdir Gölü. The Turkish Lake District is a series of shallow freshwater lakes in southwestern Anatolia, nestled between the wrinkles of the Taurus Mountains, including Eğirdir, one of the largest, at 482 km<sup>2</sup>. The Greek name of the lake is *Akrotiri*, and before the population change of the 1920s, was inhabited by a large Greek Orthodox community and a much smaller Armenian one.



Barla is not a real waterfront town, the road winds steeply from the lake shore between the mountains. The village overlooks the lake in the mountains – its location is reminiscent of Aszófő on the shores of Lake Balaton in Hungary. The newly built parts are getting closer and closer to the water, the older ones are stretching on the hillsides. Before 1922, Orthodox Greeks and Muslim Turks also lived here together.

In the upper part of the village there are several manor houses, which have been uninhabited for decades but still reveal their former wealth. Away from the village, the completely abandoned 18<sup>th</sup>-century church of Hagios Georgios is a reminder of former Greek residents.

The nearest big city is not the lakeside Eğirdir, but the more distant Isparta. Said Nursi was originally exiled here in 1925. The governor of Isparta sent him on to Barla, where he was placed in the village house. Here he spent the years of his exile in Barla and wrote a significant part of his voluminous explanations of the Qur'an, creating his own movement.



Today, of the many religious communities in Turkey, one of the largest is the one following the teachings of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi. Over the past decade and a half, this community has also begun to cultivate the cult of the spiritual father of the community, creating a whole legend around him and creating places of remembrance evoking scenes of his life – including in Barla.

Bediüzzaman Said Nursi (March 18, 1877 or 1878–1960) was undoubtedly the most influential Muslim thinker of Turkey in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Historical events are well suited to make Nursi a legendary figure today. The name *Bediüzzaman* ‘best of his age’ is said to have been given as a teenager because of his great knowledge. For the same reason and as an expression of respect, his followers also refer to him as *Üstad* ‘master’.

Said Nursi is the founder of the Nurcu Movement, the author of an extensive (approximately 6,000 pages) Quranic explanation *Risale-i Nur* 'The Message of Light'. In addition to interpretations, it contains self-reflections and stories as well.

He distinguished three stages of his own life according to the inner path he took. The first between 1877 and 1920 was the 'old Said', while until 1950 the 'new Said' and finally the period leading up to his death was the era of the 'third Said'.

Nursi was born the 4<sup>th</sup> child of a poor Kurdish family with seven children south of Lake Van, a small village in the Taurus Mountains. The town of a few houses is still officially called the village of Nur today. He was registered in the registry as Said Okur. His father was also an imam, his son studied with him and in the nearby madrasa, and according to the hagiographic narrative, he was already arguing on his own at the tender age of 16. He had a legendary memory, he is said to have learned several books by heart. At the invitation of the governor of Van he continued his studies at the provincial headquarter, where he read science books in the library and learned Turkish.

Here he developed his conception of education, the very pith of which was that institutions teaching science should also teach Islamic philosophy, significant Sufism, that is, mysticism, and in parallel, those receiving religious education should also learn science, especially mathematics.

The *İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti* 'Commission for Unity and Progress', an ambitious young Turkish movement to modernize the Ottoman Empire and stop the loss of its territory, was founded in 1906. During the so-called Thessaloniki coup in 1908, it gained power and forced Sultan Abdul Hamid to re-enact and convene parliament, the hitherto ignored 1876 constitution. A conservative counter-coup was organized against the youth Turkish movement in 1909, in which Said Nursi also played an important role. After defeating this, Nursi was arrested but he was later acquitted. He devoted all his energy to the realization of his educational ideals.

In World War I, he fought on the Caucasian front, where he was commander of a smaller unit. He was also honored for his merits. He was taken prisoner of war in Russia in 1916, from where he escaped under adventurous circumstances in early 1918. His journey home led to Istanbul through Belarus, Poland, Germany, Austria and the Balkans, where he was greeted with a standing ovation. Upon his return, he became a teacher at *Dar-al Hikmat al-Islamiye*, 'the Theological Academy'. He attacked the British occupiers in a sharp voice in the press, endangering himself once again.

Nursi watched Mustafa Kemal's activities with suspicion and concern, although he supported the war of independence. The suspicion was mutual. Mustafa Kemal offered him a high-paying post to oversee the religious affairs of Eastern Turkey. He could also have maintained his position at the *Dar-al Hikmat al-Islamiye*. However, Nursi refused. According to some sources, the two of them met in person on November 25, 1922, when Nursi allegedly raised his voice against Mustafa Kemal. From then on, they looked at each other as opponents. Nursi did not support Mustafa

Kemal's ideas and ideology. So much so, that he returned from Ankara to Van, where he lived a retired life (in a cave).

The reforms of Mustafa Kemal exiled religious thought, significantly suppressed the Muslim institutional system, and sought to keep it under state control. The monastic orders were banned, the number of the so-called *imam hatip* schools (training of mosque staff) was reduced to a minimum, Islamic theological education also took place in only one institution. Religiosity became synonymous with obscurantism, it was a shame. At the same time, especially in the countryside, "folk religiosity" continued to live on, and local religious authorities educated in various monastic orders and madrasas created a world outside the officially authorized creed. Of course, the suspicion and sometimes persecution of official institutions accompanied their activities. However, belief and folk religiosity persisted throughout.

After the suppression of the Anatolian uprisings of 1925, although Nursi did not take an active part in them, he was exiled to Western Anatolia. He refrained from the Kurdish uprising associated with the name of Sheikh Said, although one of the aims of the uprising was to restore the caliphate abolished by Mustafa Kemal. Following the suppression of the uprising, at least 5,000 judgments were handed out immediately by the court *İstiklâl Mahkemesi*, 'Independence Tribunal' of which at least 420 were death sentences.

However, as at the site of his exile, in the town of Isparta, a large crowd soon became his followers, the governor assigned him a forced residence in a village called Barla. It was during this period that he began to put his large-scale work, a Qur'an commentary *Risale-i Nur* on paper. Although he had already begun work during the First World War, at least two-thirds of the full text must have been written in Barla between 1926 and 1934. Leaving the "old Said" who was disappointed in the world behind him, the years of the "new Said", which he himself characterized with intellectual isolation and privacy, begin roughly with his years in Barla. There is not a word about persecution, but it is known that from 1931 his visitors were regularly monitored and harassed, and his educational activities were also obstructed. In 1934, his mosque was closed. Not long after, Nursi was transferred to Isparta.

Despite the difficulties, it was undoubtedly the most productive period in Barla, where he also wrote a 33-part treatise called *Sözler* 'Words'.

Next in his line of works is the *Mektûbat* 'Letters', which contains 33 letters to his disciples. Both *Lem'alar* 'Rays of Light' and *Şualar* 'Rays' are defense speeches written in his own defense. He pronounced the former in a criminal trial in Eskişehir in 1935 and the latter in a trial in Afyon (Afyonkarahisar) in 1948–49. He was accused of an attempt to overthrow the secular order. Nursi lived in exile in various locations between 1926 and 1949, after which he settled in Isparta. This is the era of the "Third Said".

When the multi-party system was introduced (after 1946), he encouraged its supporters to support the Democratic Party (DP) led by Adnan Menderes. Nursi considered communism to be the most threatening threat of his time (as it combined

the teaching of atheism and materialism), so he supported the DP's Western orientation, Turkey's NATO membership, and its involvement in the Korean War. In view of the communist threat, it was necessary to unite Muslims and Christians. To this end, he contacted Christian leaders (he wrote to the Pope and to the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople).

In the last part of his life, despite his declining vitality and torturous illnesses, he traveled extensively, and on March 20, 1960, he drove to Urfa (Şanlıurfa). He already felt very weak on the way and died in his hotel room on the 23<sup>rd</sup> during his stay in Urfa. His funeral took place on the 25<sup>th</sup>, his farewell was in the Ulu Mosque, and near it he was laid to rest in front of the entrance to Abraham's cave. He was accompanied by a crowd of thousands on his last journey, his coffin being handed almost hand to hand.

In May, the same year, a military coup took place in Turkey. Members of the then-ruling Menderes government and DP leaders were arrested – and later Menderes and his two associates were executed. Immediately after the coup, in June, Nursi's corpse was excavated and transported to an unknown location. To this day, it has not been revealed where he rests. From time to time, news pops up about finding a real resting place. (Presumably his tomb is in Isparta.) The fact of not knowing where he rests contributes to the legends woven around his figure.

Nursi's activity was already surrounded by a kind of mystique in his life. He created his main work during a period of total prohibition of religious literature. The purpose of the commentary was to present the living text of the Qur'an, which is also able to respond to the challenges of the modern age. Barla did not have a library at his disposal, the references had indeed to be quoted from memory. He recruited followers from among the locals, who then followed him all the way to their deaths. Nursi dictated his thoughts to one of his students, who took notes in shorthand. After clearing the manuscript, several copies were made and distributed to other students across the country – the network was called Nursi's Post Office. His followers acquired the first duplicating machine in 1946, while the first official edition may have appeared in 1956. Proponents say the number of handwritten copies could reach 600,000.

The promotion of Said Nursi and the dissemination of his teachings is still considered to be their task by his students. Along with the popularization, the mystification of Nursi's person began, almost inevitably.

One of the most famous Nursi biographies – *Islam in Modern Turkey. An Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (2005) – author Şükran Vahide (originally Mary Weld, 1949–) converted to the Muslim faith as an adult under the influence of Nursi's teachings. She devotes her life to translating Nursi's works into English. He married one of Nursi's students, Mehmet Nuri Güleç (1928–2020), known as Mehmet Fırıncı. Her husband's life goal was to publish and promote Nursi's works, so he run a book publishing house (Sözler and several other names).

In the preface to her book, Şükran Vahide describes that in her work she relied mostly on Nursi's disciples and on the writings of the master himself. This important note of the author was omitted from the Turkish edition. His book contributed significantly to the formation of the legends surrounding Nursi's person. The author sought to process every moment of Nursi's life. Thus e.g. we also learn that who made the soup for him at his forced residence in Barlai, but with the same precision she tries to reconstruct the history of his inner struggles from his surviving writings.

The Nurcu movement, created by Nursi, began to create memorials in the locations of Nursi's life through its foundations in the second half of the 2000s. These are memorial houses and museums run by foundations. As soon as the visitor enters, it becomes clear that these are not simple memorial sites. Nursi also has four (!) memorial sites in the village of Barla. He lived here twice for a total of eight and a half years, so his two former houses were also converted into memorials. A memorial is also the mosque he created and the grove where he used to walk and meditate. Nowadays, both dwellings are designed to hold homemade services there. Shoes must be taken off when entering (this is not common in museums, a bag may have to be pulled on the shoes), ladies are provided with shawls if they may not be wearing them (this is also not common in a museum) and a footwisher (*şadirvan*) on the ground floor of one of the houses can also be found.





The furnishings of the buildings allow quite a few people to sit around and listen to the reader. There are no exhibits at all, there is no reference to Nursi's person other than his image on the wall and the quotation from him. Both buildings could be renovated thanks to the generosity of a student. (During his second exile in Barla, he lived in a house in the immediate vicinity of a sycamore tree, so he could move from the window to the tree where a room was built for him. Today, this room built on the tree no longer exists.)



The situation is similar with the mosque that can be linked to the name of Nursi in the village. The building shows that it was originally built not as a mosque but presumably as a residential house. It is also clear that the locals, the people of Barla, do not use this building as a mosque. One board reads that Nursi's followers covered the cost of the renovation. We learn from a local pamphlet that Nursi was dissatisfied with the local imam and created another community of his own, holding his own worship in another mosque. A sign in the mosque informs that Nursi could not accept that all elements of the ceremony had to be recited in Turkish. In protest, he acted as an unpaid prayer at the head of a self-organized community, and continued to say the *ezan* 'call to prayer' and *kameti* 'at the beginning of the prayer' in this building in Arabic. (These must be said in Turkish from 1928.) This building was renovated in 2014 by its adherents, apparently without saving money.

It is also interesting how he is remembered in his home village. In the small village, which currently consists of about 50 houses, its birthplace and mosque were renovated in the 2010s. There was also a large-scale commemoration in September 2014. The event, which was attended by about 5,000 people – *Şehri Bediüzzaman Hızan Kültür Etkinlikleri ve Nurs Mevlidi* – was opened by *Diyanet* President Mehmet Görmez.

The *Diyanet* – the *Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı* ‘Office of Religious Affairs’ – appoints the imams and covers the costs of maintaining the mosques. It also seeks to extend its control to various Muslim religious communities, for example by conditional on financial support or other means. The appearance of a representative of *Diyanet* at the celebrations clearly indicates that the movement is very close to the government’s interpretation of religion.



*Éva Kincses-Nagy at Barla in 2015*



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